CHAPTER I

The Significance of Military Cohesion

BY ALL TRADITIONAL METHODS of measuring military power, the United States and its allied forces should have had little difficulty defeating the North Vietnamese during the second Vietnamese war (1965–1972). At the height of its involvement in Vietnam, the United States was spending in excess of $25 billion a year. The US Army had committed 40 percent of all its combat-ready divisions. They were supported by 50 percent of US tactical air power and one-third of US Naval Forces.[1] Combined with allied contributions, US forces overwhelmed the North Vietnamese numerically in all traditional categories of military power.

In opposition, the North Vietnamese fielded an army in the south that was inferior in strength and significantly inferior in logistical support, firepower, and mobility.[2] Never before had such massive firepower been concentrated against an opposing army in such a limited area for such an extended period of time. In view of the overwhelming military power opposing it, North Vietnam had to rely on the human factor. Van Tien Dung, Army Chief of Staff, outlined their strategy:

> Our arms and equipment were weaker than the enemy's thus we could only develop moral superiority (within the army)

> and only then have the courage to attack the enemy, only then dare to fight the enemy resolutely, only then could we stand solidly before all difficult trials created by the superior firepower that the enemy had brought into the war.[3]

Following this strategy, the North Vietnamese Army maintained its cohesion and endured while all other armies were defeated or retired from the battlefield.

With some validity, conventional wisdom in the United States attributes the North Vietnamese "victory" to the rapid decline in public support for the US war effort after the Tet Offensive in 1968. The US public determined that further efforts were not worth the costs. This change in public attitude soon transferred into policy and the United States withdrew.

This, of course, is only a partial explanation. Another part involves how the North Vietnamese Army endured the most concentrated firepower ever directed against an army for seven continuous years. When Van Tien Dung spoke of "moral superiority" within the ranks of the North Vietnamese Army, he was referring to what many analysts consider the creation of one of the most cohesive armies ever fielded. The attention paid within that army to organization, leadership, care of the soldier, and development of military cohesion and psychological control within the smallest units has not been equalled by other modern armies.[4] The North Vietnamese Army was able to endure some of the greatest stress of combat and hardship because of its extensive development of the human element.[5]

Remarkable as it may seem, the North Vietnamese experience is not unique. Strategists such as Clausewitz, Napoleon, and Mao Tse Tung preceded Ho Chi Minh in recognizing the effect and importance of the human element in warfare. Examples can be cited from the Punic Wars through World War II, the Korean war, and the Vietnam war. Unfortunately, in most cases all that was noted were interesting stories implying the importance of the cohesion, but little was said about how this cohesion was created or maintained.

A similar situation occurred most recently in the Falklands war. During the weeks it took the British Fleet to steam to the occupied Falkland Islands, analysts throughout the world assessed the opposing forces. Conclusions on the probable outcome were

made on the basis of opposing numbers and technical capabilities, which were known with reasonable accuracy. Opposing numbers of troops were weighed. The advantage of shoreline defense versus amphibious landings and the capabilities of the limited numbers of British Harriers versus more numerous Argentine A-4 Skyhawks and Mirages were considered. The relative strength of the naval forces involved and the enormous difficulties for the British in mounting a major naval and amphibious operation at the end of an extremely long sea line of communication were discussed at length. Even the weather of the approaching winter in the southern hemisphere was considered in pronouncements about possible outcomes. Such assessments were further favored by the isolation of the theater and the apparent nature of the key terrain. Almost every significant factor was considered except the one that was to become the most important, the human element.[6] The opposing qualities of the individual soldiers and their organization, leadership, and cohesion became the deciding factor in the war. In battle, it became apparent that the Argentine Army was decisively outclassed. Although they outnumbered the British and although their weapons and supplies were more than adequate, it became clear that the Argentines lacked the will to prevail that is characteristic in cohesive, well-led units. This became even more apparent when, during negotiations for surrender, a main Argentine condition was that their officers be allowed to retain their side arms for protection against their own men.

Measuring Military Power

The failure to consider the human element in war adequately and an overemphasis on weapon capabilities, numbers of troops, and other concrete factors are caused by the difficulty in quantifying the human element, whereas the more tangible factors are easily counted, totaled, and compared.[7]

The preparation for and the analysis of modern warfare are traditionally divided into four broad elements: (1) strategy, (2) weapons and materiel, (3) technology, and (4) numbers of soldiers. Seldom is there any analysis of the human element.

The Human Element

The human element has been referred to in such terms as esprit de corps, group morale, and elan. Various analysts have

emphasized these terms differently, but they have all tended to refer to the motivation of the individual soldier as part of a group. Currently, the favored term, *cohesion*, is given a broader and more definitive meaning. Recognizing that small-group norms can militate against the organization, some writers prefer to use the term "military cohesion" to signify that small-unit norms are in congruence with army objectives and goals. More specifically, cohesion has been defined as

> the bonding together of members of an organization/unit in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and the mission.[8]

Even more specifically, cohesion exists in a unit when the primary day-to-day goals of the individual soldier, of the small group with which he identifies, and of unit leaders are congruent—with each giving his primary loyalty to the group so that it trains and fights as a unit with all members willing to risk death to achieve a common objective.[9]

Cohesion, as described above, is the determining factor in assessing and comparing the human element of opposing armies. The nature of modern war indicates that small-unit cohesion is the only force capable of causing soldiers to expose themselves consistently to enemy fire in pursuit of an army's goals. The confusion, danger, hardship, and isolation of the modern battlefield have caused a pronounced de-emphasis on strict orders, rote training, and coercive discipline. At the same time, there has been a significant shift downward in the control of soldiers in combat. Accompanying these changes has been increased emphasis on controlling soldiers through an internalization of values and operating rules congruent with the objectives, goals, and values of the organization. The need for these changes has been recognized to some degree within most armies but especially by the Vietnamese and the Chinese. Early in the organization of their armies, they realized their need to rely on the human element in view of their inferiority in weapons and technology. Mao preached:

> In all armies, obedience of the subordinates to their superiors must be exacted . . . but the basis for soldier discipline must be the individual conscience. With soldiers, a discipline of coercion is ineffective, discipline must be self-imposed, because only when it is, is the soldier able to understand

> completely why he fights and how he must obey. This type of discipline becomes a tower of strength within the army, and it is the only type that can truly harmonize the relationship that exists between officers and soldiers.[10]

Why Soldiers Fight

Mao recognized that in modern war the individual soldier is alone except for two or three close comrades on his right and left. The formal organization of the army has no means even to keep the soldier in view, much less closely supervise his behavior. For this reason, the significance of the small unit to which the soldier belongs can hardly be overstated. The small group develops strong rules of behavior and expectations about individual conduct on the basis of face-to-face relationships and thereby becomes the immediate determinant of the soldier's behavior. In a unit that is properly led and controlled by its leaders, all other influences become secondary. Such overwhelming influence of the small group in war as well as peace has been documented in many armies.[11] Shils and Janowitz, for example, quote a World War II German soldier who makes the point clearly:

> The company is the only truly existent community. This community allows neither time nor rest for a personal life. It forces us into its circle, for life is at stake. Obviously, compromises must be made and claims surrendered. Therefore the idea of fighting, living, and dying for the fatherland is but a relatively distant thought. At least it does not play a great role in the practical motivation of the individual.[12]

Describing the actions of soldiers in Korea, Alexander George makes essentially the same case:

> The most significant persons for the combat soldier are the men who fight by his side and share with him the ordeal of trying to survive.[13]

And S.L.A. Marshall, who has observed soldiers in numerous wars and armies, observes:

> I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade.[14]

Well-written fiction also recognizes this basic truth about war.[15] In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Remarque speaks of the importance of the soldier's comrades:

> These voices, these quiet words, these footsteps in trench behind me recall me at a bound from the terrible loneliness and fear of death by which I had been almost destroyed. They are more to me than life, those voices, they are more than motherliness and more than fear; they are the strongest, most comforting thing there is anywhere, they are the voices of my comrades.[16]

Several wars and over 50 years later, James Webb writes in *Fields of Fire* of the Vietnam soldier's link with his fellows:

> The bald, red hills with their sandbag bunkers, the banter and frolic of dirt-covered grunts, the fearful intensity of contact. . . . Down south his men were on patrol, or digging new perimeters, or dying, and he was nothing if he did not share that misery.[17]

Methodology

The impact of the primary group on unit cohesion is recognized by all observers as very significant (see appendix). Even those who suggest it has limitations agree that the concept of the primary group is central in explaining a soldier's behavior.[18] Most of the discussion concerning the degree to which the primary group should be credited for explaining why men fight, however, appears to be of the straw-man variety. Social scientists generally do not attribute the soldier's willingness to fight solely to the primary group. All recognize that primary group influences can militate against organizational goals unless appointed leaders become the dominant influence within the group. Furthermore, Janowitz, one of the earliest analysts to recognize the importance of the primary group in explaining a soldier's behavior, states that the concept of the primary group must be included within a "theory of organizational behavior in which an array of sociological concepts is employed." [19]

In a recent effort to describe the soldier's motivation, Anthony Kellet states that an approach "combining individual, organizational, and social factors with situational ones offers a more complete explanation of combat motivation." [20]

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to offer an approach for assessing and comparing cohesion among armies. This approach centers on the influence of the small group on the soldier's daily life but also takes into account organizational, situational, and social factors such as leadership, socialization, ideology, organizational support and policies, and the stress caused by combat and hardship. The appropriate focus of such an approach is on the small unit because this is the only locus within an army where the individual soldier with his personal characteristics, influenced by his socialization and ideology, can be observed within the organization. Together with the small group facing situational factors, the organization is also very visible at this level with its leadership, policies, and support.

Research Plan

The comparative method is used to contrast and measure indicators of cohesion in four armies. These indicators are drawn from an ideal model of a cohesive unit presented in chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 5 and 7 outline broad societal and leadership factors that influence the soldier within his small group, factors which, in turn, affect cohesion. Each of these conceptual chapters is then used in the succeeding chapters as the basis for contrasting and assessing the degree of cohesion in different armies. Existing contrasts in different areas affecting cohesion are illustrated by the use of charts with arbitrary weightings designed to highlight the contrasts described in the text. These, of course, are not definitive but depend upon the judgment of the analyst. Chapter 9 presents conclusions and recommendations.

A basic premise of this study is that it is possible and very useful to synthesize secondary knowledge and conclusions from a variety of sources and disciplines that have already been developed and are widely acknowledged. Although my primary research into the combat motivation of the North Vietnamese soldier has

had a significant influence on my approach,[21] I have also relied on many other sources.[22]

Finally, this effort is not limited to cohesion in Western armies or in armies from developed countries, but relies on knowledge and findings on cohesion and combat motivation in armies worldwide. Investigation of cohesion limited to Western democracies significantly constrains the examination and ultimately limits the understanding of cohesion and combat motivation.[23] Perhaps even more significant is the possible danger of generalizing about the military power of a potential non-democratic opponent that has a highly developed system for promoting cohesion—solely on the basis of knowledge gained from examining motivation in Western armies.

It is a mistake to assume that a democracy or any other type of government is guaranteed an army inherently better than that of neighboring political systems. This is especially true of democracies that have forgotten that personal and individual sacrifices are necessary to build an army sufficient for their protection—those in which the citizens have become increasingly self-indulgent, lacking the self-discipline and sense of responsibility necessary to assume their share of the common defense while missing few opportunities to assert their rights.